



49° F Latest forecast

Sprint POWER UP NO ONE HAS A MORE POWERFUL NETWORK IN CHICAGO. See why >

Hello, Robert | Subscribers: [Get the Advantage](#) | [log out](#)

Search:

- [E-mail this story](#)
- [Printable format](#)
- [Search archives](#)

[chicagotribune.com](#) >> [Religion](#)



Eric Zorn

Mandatory silence sends loud message

Published March 27, 2007

Well, I, for one, am not going to be silent about the bill that passed the Illinois Senate last week that requires public school students to start each day with a moment of silence:

I'll say it loud: The proposal is rotten -- sneaky, unnecessary and intrusive.

Democratic senators who unanimously supported the bill should be ashamed of themselves for advancing the pet Trojan horse of the religious right, which has promoted moment-of-silence requirements nationwide as a way to encourage students to pray without offending the Constitution.

Republican senators should also be ashamed. Their party usually decries the busybody impulses of government and extols the virtues of local control of schools, yet all but one of them voted Wednesday to send the moment-of-silence mandate to the Illinois House.

Sen. Dan Rutherford (R-Chenoa) is the only member of the upper chamber who can hold his head high.

"State law already allows schools or teachers to start the day with a moment of silence if they want to," Rutherford said Monday. "That's important. If they feel the need to do it or believe it's a good idea, the law says they may."

Amending the Silent Reflection and Student Prayer Act to change "may" to "shall," the legislative brainchild of Sen. Kimberly Lightford (D-Maywood), "isn't necessary," Rutherford said. "That's not what government should be doing."

The law permitting moments of silence has been on the books since 1969. The Illinois State Board of Education does not know how many districts or classrooms take advantage of the opportunity, a spokesman said.

Like most such laws, it specifies that the moment "shall not be conducted as a religious exercise but shall be an opportunity for silent prayer or for silent reflection on the anticipated activities of the day."

But, in truth, moment-of-silence laws have long been the favored ruse of those who remain outraged by the Supreme Court's 1962 ruling banning organized prayer in public schools.

In 1985, the high court struck down a moment-of-silence mandate in Alabama as unconstitutional, noting that state legislators freely admitted during debate that it was an attempt to get prayer back in the classroom.

After that that ruling, though, lawmakers nationwide have been careful to add a secular gloss to moment-of-silence legislation.

In Virginia in 2000, for instance, sponsors purred that their mandatory

Most e-mailed (last 24 hours)

- [Foie gras purveyor fined](#)
- [Love letters too good to stay lost](#)
- [The pros, on sub perfection](#)
- [To some in Paris, sinister past is back](#)
- [TJX says 45.7 million credit-card numbers were stolen](#)

[More from today](#)
[Past week](#)

Change of Subject

[Love letters from the grave -- not just for soldiers or the deceased](#)

[Favoritism for cops assaults the public trust](#)

[Gubernatorial Q&A No. 1: Isn't this just a sales tax in disguise?](#)

[Cops compound the outrage by rallying 'round the thug](#)

[Garry Meier sets the wayback machine for 1993](#)

[More...](#)

Change of Subject is a frequently updated, Web-only site for observations, reports, tips, referrals, tirades and other reflections on life and the news.

RS

Eric Zorn videos



Find Your Graduating Class

I graduated in:

1996
1986
1976
1966
1956

Access Breaking News & information on your mobile phone or PDA anytime you want..

GET IT NOW!

- [The Tribune's Eric Zorn on Obama's campaign songs](#)
- [True Character](#)
- [Political Debate](#)
- [Bears Names](#)
- [High School Reunions](#)
- [Penmanship](#)
- [Sudoku - this generation's Rubick's Cube?](#)
- [Words ending with "ectemy"](#)
- [Broken-in polo shirts](#)
- [Kumbaya](#)
- [Zorn: When computer monitors go bad](#)
- [Eric Zorn and Mary Schmic talk about Nowak](#)
- [Pests](#)
- [Kumbaya](#)
- [Fashion](#)
- [Sudoku](#)
- [When monitors go bad](#)

[Check All](#) | [Clear All](#)

Select videos.
Click [here](#) to play.

Learn more about the [video player](#) and check the [troubleshooting tips](#).

Biography

[About Eric Zorn](#)

[E-mail Eric Zorn](#)

On the Web

[Extra info: EricZorn.com](#)

Recent columns

[Favoritism for cops assaults the public trust](#)
March 29, 2007

[Mandatory silence sends loud message](#)
March 27, 2007

[CHANGE OF SUBJECT](#)
March 25, 2007

[Frustration can be felt in fallen soldier's e-mails](#)
March 22, 2007

[Soldier's dad tells Bush 'this war is wrong'](#)
March 20, 2007

[All recent columns](#)

Site index

News

- Local news
- Nation/world news
- Opinion
- Columnists
- Politics
- Religion
- Special reports
- Photos
- Video
- Multimedia
- Obituaries
- Health
- Education

Business

- Your money
- Stocks
- The Digital Page
- What's ahead
- Business tech
- Technology
- Wireless/Networking
- Columnists

Sports

- Chicago Bears Super Bowl coverage
- Bears
- Bulls
- Blackhawks
- Cubs
- White Sox
- Colleges
- High school
- Golf
- Soccer
- Columnists

Travel

- Flight tracker
- Travel deals
- Fall colors
- Midwest getaways
- Follow the sun
- Skiing
- Cruising
- National Parks
- Resourceful traveler
- 10 for the road
- GeoQuiz

Entertainment

- Arts
- Critics' reviews
- Dining
- Food
- Horoscope
- Leisure
- Lottery
- Movies
- Music
- Theater
- Shopping
- Television

Today's paper

- In the community
- Registration
- Subscription
- Contact us
- Send a news tip
- What's in it for you?

Classified

- Find a job
- Find a car
- Find real estate
- Find an apartment
- Shopping
- Find a mortgage
- Dating
- Pets
- Place an ad
- How to advertise

moment of silence was simply a response to school shootings around the nation; a hope that students who took time to reflect, meditate or pray each morning would be less likely to ventilate one another.

Yeah, public safety -- that's the ticket!

Arguments don't get more transparent than that. Yet the Supreme Court went along, refusing in October 2001 to re-examine a lower court ruling that upheld the Virginia mandate, similar to mandates now reportedly on the books in a dozen states.

In Illinois, Lightford said Monday that her proposal is about "requiring children to have a moment of reflection for the day's activities and whatever they might have to deal with. There are a lot of behavior issues, overcrowded classrooms and so on. This gives teachers an extra incentive to gather the class and get the students focused."

It might help. But of course maybe, depending on the kids, they'd get a better start to the day if they spent that moment singing a happy song, stretching, listening to a good poem, or hey, here's an idea, getting right to work learning the material. Constitutional issues aside, that's a decision for their classroom teachers, not a crew of idle moralists in Springfield with their one-size-fits-all fantasies and their ill-concealed pro-prayer agenda.

I asked Lightford: Why should the legislature make this educational decision instead of the teachers?

"It will allow for more uniformity," she said. "Here in the General Assembly we open every day with a prayer and Pledge of Allegiance. I don't get a choice about that. I don't see why students should have a choice."

The sad thing is, I believe Lightford absolutely when she says she doesn't see. Almost no one in Springfield seems to.

Post comments to the Web at <http://chicagotribune.com/zorn>.

You can search for more columns [in our archives](#).

Copyright © 2007, [Chicago Tribune](#)

[How to advertise](#)

